

Comments on Refugee Movement: Another Aspect of Popular Movements in West Bengal in the 1950s and 1960s

The paper situates the refugee movement in West Bengal against a broader canvas to explore how it coalesced with mass movements leading to a wider visibility of the refugees. By intertwining the refugee voices with government reports and dossiers, the paper focuses on how the refugee movement permeated, percolated and merged with the other mass movements of the period.

The paper essentially focuses on the UCRC-CPI led refugee movement and the relentless struggle that they waged on issues pertaining to the refugees, namely, Land and Rehabilitation; the 'Dispersal' Policy of the Government as also the impact these movements had on women and their role and how finally on other contemporary movements - Food, Tram and Teachers. One positive aspect of the paper is that it transcends the geographical limits of Calcutta and its fringe areas to highlight the camp and colony politics as it unfolded in Nadia and here, I would like to offer my comments.

This sudden divergence towards Nadia has not been adequately explained. Why suddenly Nadia? One needs to bear in mind that with the onset of post-Partition migration, Nadia witnessed a mammoth influx from across the border. Nadia harboured the two largest refugee camps in the state- Dhubulia in the Sadar Subdivision and Cooper's Camp in the Ranaghat Subdivision of the district. Camp-politics, as it unfolded in Nadia, over the early 1950s followed a different trajectory from the UCRC-CPI combination as witnessed in Calcutta and its outskirts. The paper is too UCRC-CPI centric and even when one is talking of 'popular' movement, somehow the popular aspect of the movement gets lost in this grand narrative of UCRC-CPI alliance.

Nadia offers an interesting case-study, where the other smaller leftist factions held sway over camp politics in the early 1950s. The lefts were a fragmented lot and it the splinter groups who were more visible in Nadia, namely, the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Socialist Republicans, the Bolshevik Party and the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI).¹ The Intelligence Bureau maintained a separate dossier on the refugee politics in the Nadia camps titled Weekly Confidential Report which was periodically submitted to the

¹ RSP was founded in 1938 as an offshoot of the terrorist group- AnushilanSamiti. Sarat Bose founded the Socialist Republicans in 1947; SaumendraNath Tagore formed the RCPI in 1934 after he broke off with the CPI. The Bolshevik Party was created in 1933 by N. Dutt-Mazumdar, who was deeply influenced by Marxism as a student of the London School of Economics.

government for necessary follow-up actions. One such report branded these leftist parties as 'upstart political organisations.'

These leftist groups formed 'apolitical' organisations with generic names to organise the refugees—UdbastuEkakParibarbhukto O ParibarbargaSamiti, JelaBastuharaJanakalyanSamiti, ParikalpanaParishad, PurbaBangaBastuharaSamiti. In 1948 and 1949, Forward Bloc and RCPI dominated the Chandmari and Goshala Camps. ArunBanarji of RCPI recruited refugee youths from Goshala converting them into staunch anti-government critics. Socialist Republicans dominated Haringhata Refugee Camp. From 1950 onwards RSP started infiltrating the Chandmari Camp. Overall, in Nadia, RCPI always had the upper hand, the prominent leaders being Prabhat Mukherjee and AmalenduNeogi of Chandmari Camp. The RCPI formed the Bangiya Dal SebaSangathan to recruit and organise camp women. In October 1950, the RCPI engineered secret meetings, forcibly acquiring 175 bighas of government land in front of Gayeshpur Colony—a government-sponsored colony—to be distributed among 350 refugee families.

The picture that Nadia portrays is somewhat different from that of Calcutta and its suburbs. Of course, the CPI emerging as the largest opposition party after the 1951 elections, having won 28 of the 86 seats that they contested. Hence, one cannot ignore the party and its seminal contribution along with UCRC—the largest refugee organisation in the state—but one needs to take cognizance of the so-called smaller players. Unless these lesser-heard voices are culled out, one cannot have a holistic picture without which a true appreciation of the term 'popular' is not possible.